



Staff photo by Stuart T. Wagner

WAVE LENGTHS — As station manager at VCU's carrier-current radio station, WVCW, Max Ryder sees college stations as an alternative music source that benefits the city and school.

College stations make effort to play something different

By Ophelia D. Johnson
Times-Dispatch staff writer

An executive in blue jeans and a button-down shirt, Max Ryder, 21, is plugged into one of the last vestiges of youthful experimentation: college radio.

"My mission is to not only expand the musical palette of VCU, but to help teach the profession of being a disc jockey," said Ryder, station manager at WVCW, Virginia Commonwealth University's radio station.

The station (640 AM), located at 916 W. Franklin St., offers a mix of jazz, blues, reggae and hard rock. It is carrier-current; the signal is carried only through telephone lines to dormitories, the cafeteria and other areas.

Ryder, a junior mass communications major, works weekends at WRXL-FM. During the week, he helps fine-tune a play list of "alternative music."

Because they don't have to worry about pleasing large advertisers, or delivering to a particular demographic group, they're free to play what they want.

More often than not, that means a huge variety of music, peppered with songs that can fall on the ears differently, depending on your age.

This is where you will find Jesus Jones, The Divinyls, R.E.M., Jane Child, Lemonheads, Brand Nubians, Ice Cube and others topping CMJ's New Music Report, the

college music equivalent of Billboard.

"We don't get too weird. There's no punk music. We come close to Top 40," said Ryder. "When a song gets played on [commercial] stations, we back off. We're finding our niche."

"We've been here about 24 years and we're seeing more interests from the university. Maybe this is our prime time. We have inspirations to go FM one day, but we're taking things one day at a time."

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Regardless of the packaging, college radio pumps out new voices each year. As a training ground for the commercial radio-bound, students learn to produce, direct, manage, synthesize, spin and sell advertising space.

Some high school radio stations do the same thing, including Highland Springs Technical Center's station, WHCE-FM (91.1).

All but a handful of college radio stations in this country are non-commercial, that is, they are financed by universities and individuals, so they don't care if Hoover ever sells another vacuum cleaner.

WDCE-FM, the University of Richmond's station, is Richmond's most listened-to college station, mainly be-

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College radio unusual

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cause of its FM format. It is located in the Tyler Haynes Commons at UR.

"WRXL will play one cut and we'll play different selections on the same album. That's the way commercial radio works. They'll play a song until it's drilled into people's heads," said Alex Wassiliew, the station's general manager. He is a senior economics major.

WDCE, which plays jazz, rap, progressive and classical, wants more university involvement, said Wassiliew. UR does not have a communications school and the radio station has no faculty adviser.

"We're students and this is a learning process, but we want people who care about the station.

"There are people out there listening. We can't come close to stations like WRXL, so we try to offer alternatives to the run-of-the-mill."

Michael Street, a junior, does a rap music segment. The radio station advertises it as a "house segment." He started out his freshman year and worked his way up from the graveyard shift.

"It adds variety to the music," he said. "Not another show in the city like it. Not where they play all rap."

College radio has been hitting the airwaves since the 1930s and early '40s. Most college stations signed on when AM radio was the only game around.

For years, they modeled themselves after commercial stations, but things changed when AM fizzled in the early 1970s and more and more stations defected to FM.

With local college radio stations, budgets vary as much as the wattage. WDCE gets by on \$13,000 a year. WVCW has about \$10,000 and no paid positions.

Amenities, such as compact discs, are becoming more commonplace. WDCE even has a wire service that provides up-to-date news and weather. WVCW relies on newspapers, television and other radio stations.

Regardless of the hardware, the fast-paced college atmosphere keeps the electricity crackling on the air.

Students come in for three- and four-hour shifts, usually between classes. Most freshmen are relegated to the later shifts.

"Most students come to us," said Jay Brook, a senior at VCU. Every fall, they put up fliers in the Student Commons announcing openings at the station.

"We fit people in blocks," he said. "If you're stuck with the graveyard shift, you can usually work yourself into a better slot."

Javier Hernandez, a VCU sophomore, came to WCVW last year to get advertising sales experience.

With college radio credentials under their belts, the chances of finding a job in the market are better, said Dr. Elizabeth Kuhn, a faculty adviser and "Blues Doctor" with WVCW.

Commercial program directors, looking out for songs that have the potential for crossover, keep an ear on college radio, too.

The Police, the Cure, Talking Heads, U2, Tracy Chapman and other mainstream regulars got their start on college radio.

Commercial radio executives also keep an ear out for "diamonds in the rough," said Phil Goldman, general manager at WRVQ-FM.

With some college radio experience, "it might hasten your move into the bigger leagues," said Goldman, who started out at the radio station at Louisiana State University.

Russ Brown, program director with WMBX-FM, said college radio is a good avenue for training, but only when it has a structured program.

"Bad habits are formed in a free-form environment. They should have some professional broadcasters running the program. Without it, they can do or say what ever they want. That's not all bad. Everyone has to sow their oats, mature and grow up."